

Briefing Memo

Russia's Involvement in the Issue of Syria

Hiroshi Yamazoe

Senior Research Fellow

U.S.-Europe-Russia Division, Regional Studies Department

In September 2015, the Russian Armed Forces launched air raids against militant Islamic fundamentalists in Syrian territory. This became a critical factor in international politics concerning the Middle East. In fact, since the 1990s, Russia itself has been suffering from terrorist attacks by Islamic fundamentalists in its North Caucasus region, and advocating international security cooperation to counter international networks enabling terrorism. However, for the Russian Federation, which did not engage in such military operations for a long period after the end of the Cold War, launching operations at a location far away from the former Soviet bloc entails a major decision; apart from fighting international terrorism, it is also possible to point to various other factors. Here, I will discuss Russia's stance that provides the context for this situation, followed by the impact of the military operations carried out by the Russian Armed Forces. I will then point out the key points to be considered moving forward.

1. Syria's Assad Regime and Russia

The relations between modern-day Russia and Syria were not as strong as military cooperation between the former Soviet Union and Syria; however, this relationship grew increasingly stronger across the stages of development of the "Arab Spring." Since the start of the anti-government movement in Syria in 2011, Russia has been strongly opposed to foreign support for the anti-government movement, particularly by countries in the West. Russia attaches the label "Color Revolution" to anti-government movements to overthrow the existing government regime into a pro-Western political system, and condemns them because they destabilize the existing order. This thinking prioritizes stable governance rather than the legitimacy of a ruler from the viewpoint of Western standards of liberal democracy. Russia also condemned the West for inflaming the anti-Putin demonstrations that took place in Russia at the end of 2011, as well as the anti-government movement that led to the collapse of the government regime in Ukraine in February 2014 (although it has maintained generally good relations with the governments of Iraq and Kyrgyzstan after the coup and change in administration). Russia is also critical of the attitude of Europe and the United States toward Libya's political troubles. It has blamed these

Western powers for playing a role in the collapse of the Gaddafi regime in 2011 through direct military action beyond the mandates of the no-fly zone approved under a UN Security Council Resolution, and creating vacuums that has allowed Islamic fundamentalist organizations to extend their reach.

For Syria as well, Russia asserts that the governance of Syria should not be undertaken by external powers, but should instead be chosen by the Syrian people. It perceives the anti-government movement as an agent of foreign involvement, and rejects the idea of changing the Assad regime. In Syria's political history, the Assad regime, representing the minority Alawites, sometimes invoked state power to govern the complex population consisting of the majority Sunnis and other various identity groups (Kurds, Turkmen, and Christians). However, the intensification of the anti-government movement that began in March 2011 and the crackdown on that movement resulted in a large number of casualties, leading to the establishment of various armed organizations and the start of a bitter civil war. Consequently, the Assad administration could only rule over the peripheries of key cities in the western part of Syria. Coupled with the unstable security situation within Iraqi territory, fundamentalist organizations such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the Al-Nusra Front grew in power in Syria since around 2014. President Bashar al-Assad's crackdowns produced a large number of casualties, and neighboring Sunni countries and countries of the West called for him to step down; however, as anti-Assad forces have not been groomed to a level that can enable them to govern Syria in place of the Assad regime, this does not seem to be a feasible solution. On the other hand, even if the Assad regime were to expand the scope of its rule, supported by Iran and Hezbollah, it would be extremely difficult to reinstate the governance of Syria in the same way as before, with the Syrian population experiencing too harsh civil war for several years. For countries that have experienced the "Arab Spring," the era when a country could be ruled over through state power alone is in the past.

As the Syrian civil war and ISIL activities began to carry more weight and importance as matters of international concern, the refugee issue became a problem that Europe was directly confronted with in the summer of 2015. Several millions of refugees from Syria had escaped from war zones to seek refuge in other parts of Syrian territory, as well as neighboring countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, but refugees who could not enter these regions and refugees who had escaped from other countries such as Afghanistan began to move toward the attractive urban regions of Europe. The European countries on the receiving end were faced with the dilemma of accepting these refugees from a humanitarian perspective and turning them away for reasons related to domestic security and employment issues. Furthermore, anti-

immigrant sentiments among the public gave rise to political upheavals, and the frequency of terrorist attacks also began to rise. Subsequently, Europe moved to strengthen its involvement in the Middle East in an attempt to curb the growth of ISIL power, which is contributing to the spread of terrorism, as well as to ease the tensions in the Syrian situation, but it was extremely difficult to improve the situation. The Obama administration in the U.S. has also sought to deal with the issues of ISIL and Syria, but its efforts never extended to means such as committing ground military forces to the fight. Rather, compared to the Bush administration before it, the U.S. military presence in the region has been shrinking. The “retreat” of the U.S. has given rise to a “power vacuum” at the international level, and is one of the major factors contributing to the confusion (Ryoji Tateyama, Professor Emeritus, National Defense Academy). In light of the struggle by Western powers to respond to the situation, and the growing calls for support from the Assad regime, the Putin administration made the decision to carry out military operations.

2. Russia’s Military Operations and their Impact

On September 30, 2015, the Russian Armed Forces began to conduct air raids in Syrian territory, citing President Asad’s request to attack the terrorist groups. Russia asserts that in order to combat the terrorist organizations the necessary international cooperation should include the Assad regime. However, the targets for its air raids in Syria focused more on the rebel armies directly confronting the Assad administration, rather than in the east where ISIL is based. Russia’s efforts helped to pull the Assad regime out of its predicament, and a scenario of “Syria without Assad” seemed more improbable than before. Furthermore, as an international issue, the operations carried out by the Russian Armed Forces and the Syrian Armed Forces under Assad give no consideration to humanitarian damage and are producing many fatalities. This has given rise to condemnation within the international community, particularly from Europe and the United States.

Even so, a development that was advantageous to Russian diplomacy emerged. Even the United States, which had restricted high-level dialogue to demonstrate its intolerance for Russia’s actions in the Ukraine crisis, came to involve Russia in its efforts to ease the humanitarian crisis afflicting Syria. Thus, it began to engage in frequent consultations with Russia, dispatching officers such as Secretary of State John Kerry to Moscow. United States and Russia signed and enforced an agreement on accident prevention for military aircraft, and were seen to be in accord on the stance that support should be given to the Kurdish forces fighting ISIL. In November 2015, a large-scale terror attack involving ISIL struck Paris, and both France and Russia showed a cooperative stance in countering terrorism in the aftermath of the attack. In

February 2016, a Syrian ceasefire proposal, prepared by the United States, Russia, and the United Nations, was enacted, and the organizations involved in the Syrian civil war declared a ceasefire for some time as a result of this proposal. Hence, while Russia's military operations may have created new humanitarian issues, countries in the West are also beginning to take Russia into consideration as they move to draw up policies on dialogues toward ending the war in Syria and countering terrorism. This was probably Russia's greatest objective in carrying out military operations.

The Syrian operations also contributed to enhancing Russia's military capabilities. In October 2016, Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu declared that the year of military operations improved security in Syria, and also pointed out that it provided the Russia Armed Forces with the opportunity to use its new military systems in actual warfare. The cruise missile "Kalibr," launched from the Caspian Sea, was able to fly over a long distance through a guiding system that makes use of the "GLONASS" satellite positioning system, and passed through Iranian and Iraqi airspace to hit Syrian territory. Russia also carried out attacks with Kh-101 cruise missiles through Tu-160 bombers, launched cruise missiles from submarines in the Mediterranean, and conducted air-raids using carried-based aircraft transported by the aircraft carrier "Admiral Kuznetsov" of the Northern Fleet into the Mediterranean. As a part of these operations, Russia strengthened the functions of its naval base at Tartus, which it has held the right to use since the Soviet era, and utilized aviation facilities such as Latakia to strengthen its military assets in Syria. Through the deployment of S-400 surface-to-air missiles, it was also able to defend Russian military aircraft beyond the scope of the Syrian civil war. As a result, it succeeded in significantly strengthening its military presence in the Middle East and eastern Mediterranean region. Domestically, Russia's military operations in Syria are perceived as an honorable fight against terrorists, who are regarded as enemies of the international community, and soldiers who fall in action can be commended and decorated publicly. This is very different from the conflict in the eastern part of Ukraine, where soldiers from Russia are merely mentioned as "volunteer soldiers who have enlisted of their own free will."

Russia's presence and its diplomatic relations in the Middle East also improved. Progress was made in its relations with Iran, which supports the Assad regime, and in 2016, Russia conducted air raids on Syrian territory using bases located in Iranian territory. It also established a terrorist information exchange center in Baghdad, Iraq, to serve as a base for international cooperation. While these two countries have always shared relatively good relations with Russia, even countries such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Israel, which take a conflicting standpoint in respect to the treatment of the Assad regime, have found it impossible to reject Russia, and are

entering into dialogue in consideration of Russia's influence. In November 2015, Turkey and Russia exchanged fierce accusations when a Russian aircraft was shot down, but the two countries took steps to improve relations from June 2016, and this trend continued even after the assassination of the Russian ambassador in Turkey in December of the same year. Iran, Turkey, and Russia are all engaged in mediation efforts to achieve a ceasefire in Syria.

3. Challenges for Russia, and Future Outlook

However, from Russia's perspectives, there are also risks as well as the aforementioned merits. The ceasefire that came into effect in February 2016 naturally did not last long, and the fighting recommenced soon after. In September, a ceasefire agreement was reached through the efforts of both the United States and Russia, but this fell through quickly. While the Syrian Armed Forces occupied the stronghold of Aleppo in December with the support of the Russian Armed Forces, the United States criticized Russia and the Assad regime for violating the ceasefire agreement and causing many fatalities. If the conclusion of agreements with Russia does not yield any significant results, it would not be worth the while of countries in the West to consult with Russia; if this leads to a complete break-off of dialogue, it would also not be beneficial to Russia. Hypothetically, even if major powers outside the region were to intervene in good faith, the parties involved in the civil war would still move during the ceasefire to improve, if only slightly, the advantageous position of their own armies. In this sense, a continued ceasefire is not an easy goal to achieve. The Assad regime regards all its enemies as terrorists and seeks to survive to the very end, and has a difference from Russia, which joins peace talks whose agenda include reconciliation with non-radical anti-government forces and change in government administration. Although Russia is carrying out operations in a way that limits costs, such as through the efficient use of resources and budgets for military exercises, the cost of supporting the Assad regime unconditionally and for an infinite period of time is far too high; on the other hand, if the Assad regime were to collapse, Russia would also lose power and influence. Reflecting this dilemma, Russia declared in March 2016 that it would be withdrawing its main troops as it had achieved the objectives of its military operations. This move is also considered to be an attempt by Russia to secure a degree of freedom. Vladimir Frolov, a Russian analyst of international issues, has pointed out similar issues, and expressed that efforts to improve relations with the West cannot be described as successful, and that it is difficult for Russia to withdraw from the war with dignity. Moreover, while Russia can destroy in the Middle East terrorists originating from Russia, inside Russia other people could be more motivated for terrorism. If mass attacks are allowed to happen frequently in the central parts of Russia such as Moscow, the authority of the Putin administration would also be compromised.

The new U.S. administration of Donald Trump from January 2017 is expected to work on adjusting the country's relationship with Russia through consultations on terrorism and Middle East security issues. By partitioning and restructuring relations to avoid excessive confrontation, the United States may be able to produce positive results. However, just as efforts by new U.S. administrations in 2001 and 2009 to rebuild relations with Russia have always eventually regressed back to a similar kind of confrontation, it is not easy to overcome the structural difficulties that are present in U.S.-Russia relations. Even if the United States were to meet Russia and the Assad regime halfway, it would be difficult for it to adopt a stance that might harm its relations with Saudi Arabia and Israel while benefitting Iran. If the Trump administration does not have confidence in Russia's desire to work together with the United States to achieve peace in Syria, or in its capability to realize peace by exercising its influence on the Assad regime, a confrontational structure is likely to emerge once again over this problem.

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